state of the nations

The Vietnam story

By Joseph C. Harsch

Obviously, we are approaching the end of the story of American involvement in Vietnam.

We can't yet see the shape of the last chapter. The withdrawal of South Vietnam government forces from the provinces of the Central Highlands does not necessarily forecast the eventual disintegration of the government and culture which Americans so long and so expensively supported.

The abandonment of those provinces will make more military units available for defending the coastal plain and the major cities, all of which lie in the coastal plain. The ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) is by now a well-trained and veteran force. It is still well armed and still able to give a good account of itself in battle. It has not been defeated. It has been regrouped and given a less ambitious assignment.

The Central Highlands have all along been disputed territory even when American troops were there. It is mountainous, thinly populated, and the terrain is ideal for guerrilla operations. The ARVN has never controlled this territory. It has held the cities, but never the countryside. The effort to control the whole has been a major drain on ARVN energy and resources. It should be able to do better at less cost in defending the coastal plain.

The withdrawal may amount to a second partition of Vietnam. The Viet Cong is now unchallenged in its control of the mountain spine. But the cities and peoples of the coast are loyal to the government in Saigon. It will be very much harder for the Viet Cong and their allies from the North to overrun the coastal plain than it has been for them to consolidate their grip on the mountains.

So, we can't see the final outcome. But we can look back and try to see what mistakes were made and when.

Back in 1945 when the Japanese military effort was collapsing, the American OSS (Office of Strategic Services and precursor of the CIA) put agents into Indo-China. They met Ho Chi Minh and provided him and his followers with money and weapons. They recommended to Washington that the United States use him as the principal vehicle for the organization of a new government in the wake of the departing Japanese. That advice was supported in the Southeast Asia section of the State Department, but it was eventually overruled on the ground that the French wanted to return to Indo-China.

Ho Chi Minh himself wrote to Washington asking for American aid. But Washington put the interests of France first, for the sake of American policies in Europe.

Suppose the verdict in Washington had gone the other way. What would the situation be like in Southeast Asia now?

The story of Yugoslavia gives us useful clues. The issue in both cases was much the same. Could the United States back a Communist regime against the old order? It was done in Yugoslavia. Tito was backed first by the British. Washington reluctantly followed the British lead. Yugoslavia was communized. But it turned into a native variety and quickly broke with Moscow. Marshal Tito never accepted Moscow discipline. Yugoslavia pursues its own independent foreign policy and its own independent variety of communism to this day.

It cannot be proved that the story of Yugoslavia would have been paralleled in Indo-China had Washington backed Ho Chi Minh in 1945 as it backed Tito in that same year. But there has always been an independent spirit among the peoples who live under the southern rim of China. They have traditionally been deferential to China, but never subjected.

Ho Chi Minh was as much of a man, and as much of a folk hero to his people, as Marshal Tito in Yugoslavia. Had Washington backed him, the chances are reasonably good that he would have behaved like Tito and played the great powers against each other to keep himself and his country independent of any one of them.

If that had happened, Indo-China today would presumably be Communist, but independent of both Peking and Moscow. There would be no civil war and no bloodshed.

Which would have been the lesser evil, what might have happened or what has happened?